

Doctors Recommend Early Prevention Of Old-Age Frailty

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Preventing rickety bones in old age starts around age 30.

That's when smart females start a calcium intake watch, making sure they get 1 gram of the substance daily — either in pill or dietary form, says Dr. William Arno Peck, expert on osteoporosis, a condition implicated in the 200,000 hip fractures in women over age 65 each year.

The bill for those runs into millions. No price can be put on the suffering.

The National Institutes of Health reports, complications from these fractures now constitute the 12th most frequent cause of death in the United States.

Proper calcium intake from the age of 30 on, Peck claims, helps keep bones strong. He said most Americans get less calcium than they need and even the Recommended Daily Allowance falls short of his gram-a-day dose.

Peck, physician-in-chief at the Jewish Hospital of Washington University Medical Center, St. Louis, chaired the recent National Institutes of Health Consensus Development Conference on Osteoporosis.

He also recommends exercise to ward off the possibility that one's bones will cave in as the years roll on.

Jogging, walking and biking are best. Such exercise puts stress on bones, making them stronger.

Swimming, while a good exercise generally, does not put the same kind of stress on the skeleton. Doctors say bones under stress undergo less resorption.

Peck said that lifestyle factors that can increase a woman's risk of developing osteoporosis include chain-smoking, heavy drinking, and consuming large quantities of coffee daily.

There was a caveat to his calcium edict: anyone with kidney trouble should ask her physician for guidance about calcium pills.

The expert talked about calcium and exercise during an interview on the risks and benefits of various stratagems for treating and preventing osteoporosis, the degenerative bone disorder that causes abnormal bone loss. Other therapies include estrogen and vitamin D.

Peck said no single therapy exists either to treat or prevent osteoporosis.

Some therapies have possible untoward effects, and doctors should help patients to be on the lookout for them.

Peck said experience indicates estrogen can help if taken about 5 to 10 years after natural menopause and at once in the case of artificial menopause induced by removal of the ovaries.

"The common view is that if you delay menopause five years, ultimately you reduce to 50 percent the chance of a hip fracture 20 years later," Peck said.

He said women with clotting disorders should not be considered candidates for estrogen treatment. Even for others, the hormone, given in very low doses as directed by a physician, is not without its risks, he said.

One is the possible development of cancer of the lining of the uterus — endometrial cancer.

Peck said this form of cancer is highly treatable when spotted in the very earliest stage.

He recommends that physicians who put their patients on low doses of estrogen make certain the women have a gynecological examination every six months.

Peck said there was a concern that women on estrogen therapy may be at higher risk for breast cancer but that reports indicate this is not so.

Men are not so much at risk for osteoporosis, Peck said, because they tend to have greater "peak" bone mass — in the mid-30s. As with women, men start to have bone loss beginning at between ages 35 and 40. But since men have more bone mass to begin with, the bone losses in old age do not leave them in as fragile a condition as women, especially white women with spare skeletons.

But some men do develop osteoporosis. Peck said they usually have a deficiency of male hormone.

The National Institutes of Health Consensus Panel on Osteoporosis said more research is needed to:

- Develop accurate, safe, inexpensive methods for determining the level of risk for osteoporosis in an individual, to establish early diagnosis, and to assess the clinical course of the disease.

- Develop safe, effective, low-cost strategies for maximizing peak bone mass, minimizing bone loss and preventing fractures.